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## **Chester Himes: Experiences Stirred his Thought and his Pen**

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### **Abstract**

An effort to research the relationship between personal experience and the imaginative work of Chester Himes, this report explores the family life and experiences that fuel the apocalyptic theme of Himes' short story, "Prediction." The confused and anxious feelings of the main character, alone in a small chamber containing the collection box of a Cathedral, parallels with the position of uncertainty in Chester Himes' own life. While black inferiority and white dominance are depicted throughout the pages of his short story, the underlying need for change is present as well. Just as Himes' character believes that the only solution for this problem is for a black person to martyr himself against whites, Himes also believes that by making a stand one can gain equality but lose a life. This scholarly note is the result of deeper analysis of an assignment that fulfilled the research project in English 1023H, Introduction to Literature for Honors Students.

**Key Terms:** Black resistance, Chester Himes, "Prediction," Racism

Imagine a time when the local grocery store shelved bread for only fourteen cents per loaf, a time when blues tunes wisped through the air of a nightclub, a time studded with women who wore below-the-knee dresses and pin curls. Not only did these period details affect author Chester Himes, but significant social issues influenced him as well. An author's writing is often inspired by his or her experiences. This is the case for Himes as seen through one of his short stories, "Prediction." The tension between whites and blacks which Himes witnessed during his lifetime is transformed into the story's apocalyptic warning: the martyr sacrifices himself for a cause, however there is little assurance that his martyrdom will promote the desired change.

White supremacy dominates the unnamed city in Himes' short story. The story opens with description of a large parade that is taking place in the city. The spectators anxiously look toward the street as a large group of policemen march by. A black man hides nearby with a gun, waiting in the small chamber of a Cathedral that also contains a collection box. He nervously waits as a huge parade of the police force, "billed as a parade of unity," marches (Himes "Prediction" 184). The parade members and spectators are all white. The unnamed man fires from his hiding place, killing several of the police officers. He believes the only resolution for racial inequality is for a black to martyr himself against whites.

In the initial scene of "Prediction," the structured description of the parade members in rank and file gives a sense of unity and strength in the numbers: "six thousand were in the

parade” (Himes 184). The symmetry of the police force is seen through the organization of the marchers: “The captains of the precinct stations followed and the lieutenants in charge of the precinct detective bureaus and the uniformed patrolmen followed them” (Himes 184). The precision of the officers’ bearing, flowing out of Himes’ extreme precision in his description, creates a sense of unnatural power and inhuman order. The members’ intensity and flawlessness represent Himes’ perception of the attitudes of white superiority. The sketch of the parade members further emphasizes the isolation of the races in the city and the authority held by its white citizens: “The police commissioner and the chief . . . They were white . . . The captains . . . and the lieutenants. . . They were all white. As were the plain clothes detectives . . . All white. As were the spectators. . . As were all the people employed on the street” (Himes “Prediction” 184). The parade’s lack of black police officers and black spectators reinforces a white harmony. Himes writes, “At no time had the races been so utterly divided despite the billing of unity given to the parade” (“Prediction” 184).

Similar to the character in his story, Himes witnessed white dominance in an influential way. Born in Missouri in 1909, a time of deep racial tensions despite the Civil War’s end in 1865, Himes found himself exposed to several forms of racism both at home and in society. He was born into a middle-class, well-educated family. His parents, Joseph Sandy Himes and Estelle Bomar Himes, had highly contrasting skin tones. His mother, Estelle Himes, had Caucasian ancestors and could “easily ‘pass’ with her auburn hair, fair skin, gray eyes, and aquiline nose, but seldom thought of doing so” (Margolies and Fabre 5). Himes’ father, on the other hand, came from a black family and was dark-skinned with large facial features. “This difference in their backgrounds was to create untold misery in the family and, in large measure, helped to mold Himes into the man he later became” (Margolies and Fabre 5). As reported in *The Several Lives of Chester Himes*, Estelle Himes was constantly reminding her children of her ancestry and doing things to “bring the ‘white’ out in her sons” (Margolies and Fabre 11). Estelle’s air of superiority because of her light skin caused friction between herself and her husband. Chester Himes was a witness to the heated arguments that eventually resulted in his parents’ divorce. The concept of skin-tone affected him so much that he once said that he felt most comfortable amongst dark skinned blacks: “I despised the in-group class distinction based on color and the degree of white blood in one’s vein. . . I liked dark black people, I was accepted by them as just another person. I was at ease with them. Among them, I felt as black as the next person and as good as anyone” (qtd. in Skinner *Two Guns* 7).

Outside of his home, he experienced black social inferiority which resulted in a type of isolation. Plagued with the conditions of his family life and the guilt for an accident that left his younger brother blind, he felt very alone. He felt uncomfortable in his own skin and was becoming aware of the world that separated him from itself. Attending an all-white high school added to his feeling of loneliness. “Most of the time Chester felt himself friendless, and he used to wander the streets of the city alone” (Margolies and Fabre 8). Himes college days at Ohio State University really opened his eyes to his position in society:

The segregation and discrimination he found at the university bothered him so much that he was badly depressed. This first experience in the wider world marked the beginning of his inability to accept the unequal status accorded Blacks. (Skinner *Two Guns* 6)

Himes' solitude is evident in the life of the main character in the story. The difference between the size of the chamber in which the man is hiding and the grand church that the chamber is outside of illustrates the place of blacks in society during this time. The church is "the big city's big Catholic cathedral," and the room containing the collection box is a "small, unlighted chamber" that holds the "poor box." The discrepancy between the large numbers of white people in the open streets and the sole black man in the small, closed chamber adds to the idea of racial separation. "There was only one black man... and he wasn't in sight" (Himes "Prediction" 184). The darkness of the chamber and the idea that the man is hidden and "had not been seen nor had his hiding place been discovered" (Himes "Prediction" 187), reveals how whites did not see blacks as people nor even notice their existence. Likewise, society during the early twentieth century did not acknowledge the presence of the black race. These images of darkness and concealment disclose Himes' feelings about the inequality between races.

As a result of the continuous race-related situations and family problems Himes faced, a dismal, demented and violent attitude grew inside of him. He was "confused and angry at being both black and white." As a child his parents tried to keep him from experiencing racism, and as a result "he became enraged as an adult" (Margolies and Fabre 18). Even as a young boy he displayed a tough demeanor. When disciplined by his mother he would opt for more whippings as opposed to crying. Feeling isolated, confused, and guilty, Himes engaged in criminal activity. He vandalized places, robbed an armory, and stole people's identities to pass bad checks. He was jailed only for a short time for these crimes. His destructive behavior continued and in 1929, Himes was sentenced to prison for twenty years for armed robbery. Although relatively small in comparison to his fellow prisoners, Himes displayed extreme aggression and was recognized by his fellow inmates for his belligerence: "he flared into paroxysms of rage, refused work details, disobeyed guards' commands and broke other unspecified rules" (Margolies and Fabre 33). He only remained in jail for seven and a half years, during which time he began writing (Margolies and Fabre; Skinner *Two Guns*).

Himes found a way to channel his rage and make it beneficial, rather than detrimental, to himself; these brutal and uncontrolled actions were brought from behind bars onto the pages of "Prediction." There they are exaggerated. Himes describes the bloody act performed by the central character in great detail: "Snot mixed with blood exploded from their nostrils and their caps flew off behind, suddenly filled with fragments of skull" ("Prediction" 186). Similes throughout the description of the shooting allow the reader to better envision the scene by employing familiar objects. "One skull fragment... struck a ... man on the cheek, cutting the skin and splashing brains against his face like a custard pie in a Mack Sennett comedy... Bloodstained teeth flew through the air like exotic insects... hairy fragments of skull looked like sections of bloody coconuts" (Himes "Prediction" 186). The extent to which the bloody massacre is described suggests the severity of the racial conflict Himes felt and evokes fear.

It is difficult to separate the fictional musings of Himes from the social change he desired. Upon the realization that social equality would not be established as he wished, and with continuous racial obstacles in his path, Himes seemed to "harden his heart towards Americans" (Skinner). Somewhat defeated, he moved away to France, wanting to flee all the racial injustice

he faced as an African American. As a result of his lack of hope, he changed his view about the resolution to the race-problem.

An interview with Robert Skinner, the Xavier University of Louisiana Library director, an author, and editor, revealed that Himes was interested in Communism for a short time. Himes believed that the idea of everyone sharing and having social and economic equality was more appealing than other economic systems during that time. Furthermore the aim of the Communist Party was to get black people involved and “to create a powerful proletarian movement which will fight and lead the struggle of the Negro race against exploitation and oppression” (Rivera). It is understandable that Himes would be interested in Communism. In theory, it provided what he yearned for: equality for the black race. With constant race-related life experiences, Himes found that “racism was so prevalent and overwhelming that the only thing was for a black person to martyr himself against white people” (Skinner). This idea is further discussed in his essay “Negro Martyrs are Needed,” written in 1943, where he discusses his resolution to the race-problem. Himes has decided that “martyrs are needed to create incidents. Incidents are needed to create revolutions. Revolutions are needed to create progress” (“Negro Martyrs”). Himes believes the only way to initiate this progress is with the sacrifice of black lives. People who will “create incidents which will mobilize the forces of justice and carry us forward from the pivot of change to a way of existence wherein everyone is free” (“Negro Martyrs”). Believing that African Americans must make a stand, he ends his essay with, “After all, we have nothing to lose, except our lives, and one preferable change to win: Democratic equality” (“Negro Martyrs”).

The character in “Prediction” reflects Himes’ belief that only extreme apocalyptic acts can “undermine” the foundations of society (Skinner). “He would have to . . . pull the trigger . . . consoled only by the hope that it would make life safer for blacks in the future. He would have to believe that the children of the blacks who would suffer now would benefit later” (Himes “Prediction” 187). This, he hoped, would change how people are defined, ultimately erasing the supremacy associated with race. As the unnamed protagonist of “Prediction” fires, “hate serves his pleasure . . . it was the most gratifying episode of the black man’s life” (Himes 187). The protagonist, hopeful but unsure that a change will occur, knows that he is going to die. No satisfactory resolution is reached after his death. Instead, “Prediction” serves as an expressively desperate attempt for Himes to seek the change he, himself, desired.

The grueling reality that Chester Himes faced is not limited to him or his time. Countless people are challenged by the corruptness and inequality of society. The world is calling for change. One must realize this call, develop his or her ideas about what leads toward progress, and take action to transform society. Pessimism will not appease the fiery dilemma that Himes also faced: taking action toward equality, but realizing that with the economic and social conditions of this racist society, change will be a long and timely journey.

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